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ABSTRACT

Efforts to improve the quality of business communication often include developing tailor-made short courses that are offered "in-house" to corporation management personnel. These following guidelines, based on one corporate writing teacher's experiences, should help others to develop writing courses for businesses: obtain samples of the types of writing actually produced by company personnel in order to locate strengths and weaknesses; develop a small manual of grammar and style that executives can use for quick and easy reference (regular textbooks would be too unwieldy and comprehensive for such courses); focus the manual on recognition of complete sentences, punctuation that prevents misinterpretation, effective sentence interrelationships and paragraph transitions, and a unified policy on matters of form; and develop a rationale for rating "students" in the program, taking into account each student's writing proficiency prior to and after taking the course. (RL)

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"Corporate" Composition*

Kevin J. Harty

Effective writing skills are important for the businessman, and there is no reason to believe that the serious deficiencies in writing found among college and university students today are not paralleled by equally serious deficiencies in corporate business and technical writing. While the businessman may make the same grammatical errors and have the same stylistic and rhetorical problems as a college freshman, the enrollment of all of a given company's executives in a composition course at a nearby college or university is not likely to improve measurably the effectiveness of that company's written communications.

College level composition courses are generally designed for the study of expository prose. The emphasis in such a course is on the writing of clear, logical, and grammatically correct prose in a number of assigned themes of varying lengths. Clarity, logic, and correctness in prose style are prerequisite for any effective written communication, but business correspondence is not really expository prose, nor does it involve the writing of themes around carefully constructed topic sentences. Business correspondence consists of letters, memoranda, and reports of various types which need to be written in such a way that neither the sender nor the recipient has any doubt as to their exact purpose or intent. Business correspondence is designed to produce results efficiently and quickly. A tersely cogent and precise prose style is a requirement for such correspondence, and the

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average college composition course is not in itself designed to help the busy businessman improve his writing along these lines.

The business community has readily recognized the need for concern about the quality of the written communication it produces. Notices regularly appear in the Sunday New York Times for teachers of writing skills who are willing to leave their campuses on either a full or a part time basis to teach business and technical writing as part of various corporate managerial and executive training programs. Implicit in such notices is a recognition on the part of the business community that such training in writing skills needs to be done within, not outside of, the corporate structure. Courses in business and technical writing have become a regular part of English departmental course offerings, and teachers and publishers alike have risen to the occasion by providing a number of usuable texts for such courses on the college or university level (See L. W. Denton, "Texts for Technical and Business Writing," The CEA Forum, 5 [December, 1974], 6). The methods used in teaching business and technical writing on this level need, however, to be adapted to meet the special requirements of a course in "corporate" composition.

For the past four years, I have been an educational consultant to the department of management development of a corporation which owns and operates a chain of fast-food restaurants in the East. In this capacity, I have designed and taught a course in business writing, prepared a report on writing effective

reprimands, and helped establish tentative guidelines for measuring effectiveness in business writing. The course in business writing was in turn part of an overall in-house training program to meet the needs of unit, area, and district managers on a number of levels in their preparation for professional management certification through a program outlined by Robert F. Pearse of the Boston University College of Business Administration (See "Certified Professional Managers: Concept into Reality?" New York: American Management Association, 1972). Pearse's program clearly recognizes the value of and the need for training in "effective communications and the problems involved in transmitting clear messages from sender to receiver, plus the negative effects of inaccurate communications on people and organizations" (p. 28).

The thirty-eight participants in the course in business writing varied in age, educational background, and writing ability. Each, however, recognized the need for improving his writing skills if he wished to remain an effective member of the corporate team. A sense of comradery and company pride was perhaps the biggest factor contributing to the enthusiasm the participants had for the course. Their jobs required a great deal of paperwork--inventories, service orders, damage and accident forms, and a variety of letters, memoranda, and reports. Typically, though, a number of grammatical errors and stylistic problems would hamper the effectiveness of their written communications.

In response to an angry letter from a customer whose car had been towed away from the parking lot of one of the company's

restaurants, a district manager wrote: "The unit manager have been instructed to have any car towed away he saw the occupants leaving the premises." An irrate district manager rebuked one of his subordinates in a letter containing the following paragraph:

> I feel that your performance warrant this letter of reprimand since all efforts we have made to correct the situation both verbal and written have failed to produce satisfactory performance.

In an attempt to clarify a previous memorandum, a unit manager advised his superiors: "When it came to the trainees being hired . . . I personally contacted the assistant manager in my district and explained the situation to them that it is to get better qualified personnel." A district manager, in turn, ended his recommendation for the promotion of a unit manager with the following directive to his superiors: "If you approve . . . please record your thoughts and send this letter and Ron's to the proper party for consideration and processing, and a reply."

These four brief writing samples contain a number of errors which any teacher of college composition would readily recognize and would be able to correct during the course of a semester. Unfortunately, the typical businessman's schedule has no room for a semester-long three-hour course in composition with accompanying homework. Working often more than a forty hour week, he just does not have the time to devote to such a course. What the businessman needs is a "crash course" in writing skills specifically designed to meet whatever weaknesses or deficiencies

in writing he may have.

The biggest obstacle the instructor for a course in corporate composition will have to overcome is the lack of an appropriate text which will meet the needs of his students. The standard texts for college composition or business and technical writing are generally too comprehensive for the needs of a busy executive, while business English texts designed for secretaries generally deal in matters peripheral to the needs of their bosses. The last thing a businessman needs is a three or four hundred page textbook; he needs a brief manual containing a summary of the important points of grammar and style and a series of sample letters, memoranda, and reports on which to model his own.

This synthesis of grammar for a course in corporate compostion requires that the instructor narrow down as much as possible the areas such a course for businessmen would need to cover. The materials presented in the course need to be based on writing done by the participants before and during the program, and these materials need to be presented in a form suitable for a limited number of seminars dealing with problems in the participants' correspondence and reports.

In preparing a course in corporate composition, the instructor needs to gain access in some way to company correspondence. This correspondence will help the instructor ascertain exactly what types of writing his students are called upon to do. It will also show him how well or how badly his students have been performing in routine writing assignments to date. Finally, it will provide him with a basis for examples and exercises--with names changed or deleted--for class and home review.

Armed with this information, the instructor can then prepare a writing manual for his students for use both during and after the writing program. Supplemented by examples of correctly-written daily company correspondence, a simplified grammar for business men would need to concentrate on only four areas:

I. SENTENCES. The good business writer needs to be able to recognize the difference between a complete sentence and a sentence fragment. To do this, he must have a clear understanding of what constitutes a sentence. He needs to know what a subject and predicate are and what a complete thought or assertion is.

II. PUNCTUATION. Once the writer is sure of what a sentence is and how it differs from a fragment, he can begin to put his complete thoughts on paper in such a way that the interrelationships among the constituent parts of any one sentence and among the different sentences in a paragraph are self-explanatory. In short, he can begin to punctuate his sentences in a way which will prevent misreading and misinterpretation.

III. SENTENCE INTERRELATIONSHIP AND PARAGRAPH TRANSITION. Once the business writer has a firm understanding of what constitutes a sentence and when the various marks of punctuation should be used, he then needs to think in larger terms about assuring the integrity within and the coordination between his paragraphs. This requires that the writer know in advance what he wants to say and how he wants to say it. He needs to organize his major and minor points in such a way that individual paragraphs are devoted to the major points and that the sentences within a

given paragraph develop his minor points.

IV. MATTERS OF FORM. Once the business writer has checked his sentences, his punctuation, and his paragraphs, he needs to adapt each particular piece of writing to the required form. He needs to put memoranda in proper memorandum form, business letters in proper business letter form, and reports in proper report form. Matters of form will vary from company to company, but within any one company consistency should always be the rule of thumb.

While differences in size and type of corporation will require certain adjustments in individual corporate writing programs, any writing program will require a financial investment for a corporation, and, as such, accountability is of great importance in setting up such a program. The instructor, in concert with his employer, will have to develop means for measuring his students' work and progress. The standard academic grading system of A through F will be of little value here unless some attempt is made to translate what "A=outstanding" means into acceptable business terms.

The corporate structure is geared to measure results. It hires efficiency experts to help boost production, and the instructor in a course in corporate composition will find himself in the situation of being just such an efficiency expert despite the fact that writing skills cannot be measured in terms of so many products produced per hour. Some sort of rating scale is, nevertheless, both possible and necessary in relation to the writing proficiency of the students prior to and after taking the course, to the

materials presented during the course, and to the expectations of those in the corporate structure involved in setting up the program.

Given the four areas of writing difficulties outlined above, it is the effective business writer who has no problems in any of these areas and who will be able to meet the challenges presented by any writing situation. Since writing is more or less an "all or nothing situation," how we classify the "less than effective" writer may not be all that important. Nonetheless, certain "levels" can be established relative to the amount of help a given businessman may need to improve his writing skills.

Starting with the disconcerting, but unfortunately true, premise that more people today write badly than write well, we can classify the average business writer as the writer who knows the rules of good writing but who may not understand them completely. Hence, he cannot approach each writing assignment with the same degree of self-assurance. Given a difficult writing assignment, the average business writer will experience difficulties that the effective business writer would not, and these difficulties are likely to be with matters of form rather than rules of grammar.

For business writers who have difficulties with the rules of grammar, additional categories can, I think, be set up that would distinguish different degrees of deficiency; however, there is a slight problem here in classifying deficiences. A comma splice may be a "worse" error than a misplaced modifier, but it

it not always clear which grammatical errors are "mortal sins" and which are only "venial sins." Generally, though, writers who have difficulties writing good sentences also have difficulties writing good paragraphs.

The next category of business writer might well be classified as the below average business writer in that he is usually capable of writing good sentences, but incapable of combining these sentences into effective paragraphs. If the business writer does not write effective paragraphs and also experiences difficulties in writing good sentences, he should then be classified as a deficient business writer. If he is incapable of expressing even his simplest thoughts in good sentences, then he should be classified as a seriously deficient business writer. Writers who are seriously deficient, deficient, and below average are all in need of an intensive course in effective business writing. The average writer needs only a refresher course in business writing. The effective writer is ready to assume the presidency of the corporation.

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